Possible Literary Essay Topics

Gender Issues
Consider the gender of the characters in your novel. How are male and female characters portrayed? How does the work portray their roles in society? How does gender influence the choices that are available to the characters and the decisions that they make? Write a paper that explores how gender affects the plot and character development in the novel.

Alternate Topic:
Compare the influence of gender on the choices and decisions that the characters make in the world of the novel to the influence that gender would have if these characters were here today.

Positive/Negative Characters
In the novel that you’ve read, some of the characters are given positive, sympathetic portrayals. Others have negative, perhaps even villainous portrayals. Still others may begin with negative qualities and gradually become more and more positive. Rarely does an author rely on the reader’s personal sense of morality to determine which characters are positive and which are negative. Instead, there are details, actions, and characteristics that help define who is "good" and who is "bad." It’s easy to know the difference in old westerns — good guys wear white hats; bad guys wear black hats. But even then, there are other details that help you know what it going on, details that even help you construct hierarchies (e.g., slightly bad to fully evil). Think about your novel. How does the author indicate which characters are positive and which are negative? In your essay, explain how you can tell the difference.

Dreams & Reality
Take a look at the characters in the novel that you’ve read. Each of the main characters in the novel is introduced to you with certain dreams, plans, and expectations. In the course of the novel, these main characters must come to terms with the difference between their dreams and the reality of the world around them. Write a paper on your novel that examines how the main characters navigate the journey from dreams to reality — What kind of course do they follow, and how are they changed for their journey?

Realism and the Setting
Do a close examination of the setting in your novel. What are the primary locations? How are these places made realistic — how does the author use extended description, background information, and specific detail to make the setting come alive for readers? How do the main characters fit in the settings — do they seem at home? out of place? How do their reactions and interactions with the setting affect the realism of the locations? In your paper, discuss the way that the techniques that the novelist uses to make the setting vivid and real to readers, and the extent to which these techniques are effective.

Shaped by Period
Writers can’t help but be influenced by the events and people that they see around them. The question is to what extent does that influence become part of the works that they write and how do they communicate their feelings and beliefs about the world around them. For your essay, think about how the characters, setting, and themes in your novel relate to the period in which it was written. How is the novel an analysis of the period? How is it a reflection, and how is it a criticism? And how does the writer make opinions about that world clear to the reader?

Setting & Characters
Consider the relationship between the characters and the setting for your novel. Think about the way that the characters are described, their characteristics, the conflicts that they face, the actions they take, and their emotional reactions. Compare these qualities to the setting — to the way that it is described, to the particular things that are described, and to the words that are used to describe the place(s) where the novel takes place. In your paper, explain how the setting of the novel is representative (or not) of the characters.

Class Issues
Think about the role that social class plays in the novel that you’ve read. What social classes are represented in the novel? To what extent is each class depicted? Are all the classes given equal representation? How do the classes shown in the novel relate to the classes that realistically existed in the time and place where the novel takes place? As you go through your novel, consider two important questions: how does the author feel about the different social classes, and how can you tell the author’s opinion? Write a paper that explores the way that social class and class issues affect the characters and plot of your novel.